



## **Worship: Elements, circumstances and forms**

Question: *What are the elements of Christian worship?*

Answer: *The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God with understanding, faith and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as, also, the due administration of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God.*

*(Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.5)*

Worship, it is generally agreed, should consist of singing, praying and preaching. But are all of these things essential for worship? Or can we worship without them? And is anything else required in worship? These questions can be answered by the distinctions that our confessional standards draw among the elements, circumstances and forms of worship.

### **Presbyterian worship**

From what we have studied so far, it should be evident that the challenge of determining what are the proper features of worship is distinctive to Presbyterians and Reformed. It is not a Catholic or Lutheran or Episcopalian problem, because the Reformed alone approach worship from the perspective of the regulative principle. Reformed people believe that church sessions and consistories must protect the consciences of worshipers by not requiring anything in worship beyond the Biblical mandate. Reformed worship, therefore, was simple, orderly and reverent, and the people of God came into the presence of God in a manner that was as close as possible to New Testament practice.

Evelyn Underhill noted the distinctiveness of Reformed worship in her 1937 study on worship.

*"No organ or choir," she wrote, "was permitted in (Calvin's) churches; no color, nor ornament, but a table of the Ten Commandments on the wall. No ceremonial acts or gestures were permitted. No hymns were sung but those derived from a biblical source."*

She goes on to note the distinctive character of Reformed church architecture. The walls were whitened, and the pulpit was at the center, along with the baptismal font and table. Unlike Catholic, Lutheran or Episcopalian worship, the pulpit was not on the side with an altar in the middle.

Calvinists understand that to worship with unbiblical embellishments is to violate the regulative principle, because as the *Westminster Confession* puts it, *"the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture"* (21.1).

Calvin described two advantages to worship regulated in this manner. *"First, it tends greatly to establish (God's) authority that we do not follow our own pleasure, but depend entirely on his sovereignty; and secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions."*

## **Elements**

What features are essential for Reformed worship? Champions of innovation in worship are quick to claim that there is no New Testament book of Leviticus with an explicit manual on the conduct of worship. But there are a host of texts in the New Testament that provide sufficient guidance on proper elements of worship, either from apostolic teaching (such as an explicit command from Paul in his letters), or from apostolic example (the way, for example, that Luke might describe worship during the missionary journeys of Paul). Acts 2:42 furnishes us with a helpful outline: *"And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."* Here we find several keys to worship: the Word, prayer, sacraments, and a collection (*koinonia*). Other New Testament texts reiterate that these four elements characterized the worship of the early assemblies of the church on the Lord's Day and that God approved of them. In explaining this text, Professor T. David Gordon writes:

*"It is not difficult to conclude that the elements which are anticipated by our Lord's instructions to the disciples, which are observed in the churches under apostolic oversight, which are regulated by inspired epistle, are the ministry of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, spoken and sung prayers and praises, and collections for the relief of the saints."*

Gordon is echoing Calvin himself who wrote, *"No assembly of the church should be held without the word being preached, prayers being offered, the Lord's Supper administered, and alms given."* Because he saw communion as an element of worship, Calvin went so far as to desire that the Reformed church in Geneva observe the Lord's Supper on every Lord's Day. He was not able to persuade Geneva's authorities to follow his wishes, and Presbyterian and Reformed churches have traditionally celebrated the supper quarterly. Recently, however, many churches are accelerating the frequency of observance, not simply because of the early church's practice but also because of the benefits of the Lord's Supper itself.

Perhaps most difficult to understand among the elements of worship is the offering. Lately many churches, especially the self-styled "seeker-sensitive" churches, are removing the offering from worship. The momentum to do this gained strength in the wake of recent and highly publicized financial scandals among prominent ministers and televangelists. So churches want to avoid creating an impression among visitors that they are more interested in folks' wallets than their souls. But this is an unfortunate confusion of the nature of an offering. The apostle Paul instructs us that the offering is an opportunity to worship and serve God through an expression of thanksgiving (Romans 12:13), and he confirms this in his instruction to the Corinthians to take a collection on the Lord's Day (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

These then are the essentials for Reformed worship: the reading and preaching of the Word of God, prayers to God, the singing of praises to God, an offering, and the frequent observation of the sacraments. To leave these out of worship or to add to them is to disobey God's Word. Since the aim of worship is to please God, we may not go outside of God's Word to discover what pleases Him (for example, by speculating on what people may like in worship). Of course, much confusion about worship would be eliminated if worship were properly understood as directed by God and governed by His Word.

## **Circumstances and forms**

The establishment of the proper elements of worship does not resolve all worship questions. Sessions and consistories need to determine how and when the elements should be carried out in worship. The elements of worship do not instruct us on the time of worship, the length of worship, or the dimensions and seating capacity of the place of worship. Should a church worship in its own property, or in a rented building, or should it worship in a home? All of these considerations are circumstantial, and the church must decide these matters on the basis of whatever wisdom it possesses. The *Westminster Confession* acknowledges this: *"(T)here are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and*

*societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed" (1.6).*

There is yet another distinction that we must bring into worship. Consider the definition of worship that is found in the *Westminster Confession* (21.1): *"The light of nature shows that there is a God, who has lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and Both good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might."* Here we have a statement about the kinds of feelings or emotions that characterize true worship: we should express fear, love, praise and trust. These emotions should shape all of the elements of worship.

The dimension of worship that is suggested by the *Confession* here is its *form*, or the "how" of the preaching, praying, and singing in worship. The Scriptures do not provide specific forms for public worship. As the *Directory for Worship* of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church states, *"The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given his church a large measure of liberty in this matter."* Yet, the *Directory* hastens to add, this is a liberty that is to be used wisely: *"It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God's Word are observed and the Spirit of the Lord is, that all things must be done decently and in order, and that God's people should serve him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness."* So the church must design its form of worship to enable it to be conducted *"properly and in an orderly manner"* (1 Corinthians 14:40).

The Westminster Divines refer implicitly to forms in their *Larger Catechism* Q & A 186: *"What rule hath God given for our direction in the duty of prayer? A. The whole Word of God is of use to direct us in the duty of prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which our Savior Christ taught his disciples, commonly called the Lord's Prayer."*

The Divines suggest here that one particularly useful *form* of prayer is the Lord's Prayer. Similarly the Scriptures instruct us that psalms are appropriate *forms* of song. Reformed and Presbyterian directories for worship describe other forms that should accompany the elements of worship.

Regarding the reading of Scripture the OPC *Directory* writes that *"the minister does well to refrain from interspersing the reading of God's Word with human comments, and the congregation should attend to the reading with deepest reverence."*

Reformed directories have also typically given instructions about the form of the sermon. For instance the OPC *Directory* says that since God addresses the congregation in the sermon by the mouth of his servant, *"it is a matter of supreme importance that the minister preach only the Word of God, not the wisdom of man, that he declare the whole counsel of God, and that he handle aright the Word of truth."* It also says that sermons must be prepared, a warning to extemporaneous preachers, and that *"no person enter the pulpit concerning whose doctrinal soundness or knowledge of Scripture there is reasonable doubt."* No topical preaching is allowed, since *"in the sermon the minister should explain the Word of God for the instruction of his hearers and then apply it for their exhortation."* Life cannot be divorced from doctrine. Sermons should also *"warn the congregation of prevalent soul-destroying teachings by enemies of the gospel."* Finally the minister should not forget the lost. He should *"beseech the unconverted to be reconciled to God ... in order that the unsaved may rely for salvation, on the grace of God only, to the exclusion of their own works or character, and that the saints may ascribe glory for their salvation to God alone."* All of these considerations pertain to the form of the sermon. Preaching is not simply what the minister says at the point of the service where the bulletin reads "message." It is an element of worship where God speaks to His people through His servants, and it should take proper forms.

And so we have three categories: elements, circumstances, and forms, that instruct us on the what, when, and how of worship. *That* we sing in worship is established because song is an element of worship. *How often* we sing in worship is a circumstance to be determined by the session's prudential judgment. *What* we sing in worship — whether psalms or hymns — is a form of worship. The same may be said of the other elements.

These distinctions are very useful for clarifying some of the issues in the so-called worship wars. In some cases, people are simply debating what form to use — a read prayer or one said by the minister, a hymn or a praise song. These may be legitimate debates. But illegitimate ones come when people introduce new elements such as dance and drama. Perhaps some of the debating would be eliminated if these distinctions were kept in mind.

### **Ritualism: good or bad?**

Unhappily, the proper form of worship has suffered from neglect in current thinking on worship. One consequence of this inattention is that many Presbyterians are suspicious of liturgy or ritual. Charles Hodge himself wrote that liturgical worship tends "to formality, and cannot be an adequate substitute for the warm outgoings of the heart moved by the spirit of genuine devotion." Thus the prevailing sentiment is that worship without form, or *informal* worship is the most genuine expression of worship that Christians can offer.

Yet a dangerous assumption lurks behind reasoning like this, namely that genuine devotion and sincere feelings for God can only be expressed adequately when we use our own words, not the words of someone else. Of course, it is the charismatic movement that has encouraged us to believe that we must worship God in our own tongue, with a preference for spontaneity and individual expressiveness in worship. We noted before that charismatics, whatever flaws they may possess, at least have the virtue of worshiping in ways that are consistent with their theology. Reformed cannot worship that way. We do not believe that the Holy Spirit works best when we feel a certain way, when we get excited, or when we are caught up in the moment.

And even though charismatics are consistent, their worship rests on several flawed assumptions. First, it is possible for people to be "moved" in worship by the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* or even the Roman Catholic mass, and many feel that the Holy Spirit is particularly present when those forms are used. And if the experience of the worshiper is our sole standard, why then is the experience of one reciting the *Heidelberg Catechism* any less legitimate than that of the person who speaks in tongues? Moreover, what about the experience of the Jew or the Mormon or the Buddhist? If they have a moving experience is their worship more genuine and therefore more true? Obviously not. So ecstasy or spontaneity in worship cannot be a measurement of its legitimacy. The only genuine experience in worship is a proper response to the Word of God.

Further, it is possible for worshipers to deceive others and themselves through counterfeit experience. Former Pentecostals have testified that they have spoken in tongues because they yielded to peer pressure, not necessarily because the Spirit was alive and present. Others have responded to invitations at the end of evangelistic rallies also for less than genuine reasons. Consider too how often extemporaneous prayers are really full of stock expressions and formulas, such as, "we just praise you" or concluding "in Jesus' name." These examples suggest that some actions that appear spontaneous are really established liturgies in themselves. So there is no avoiding ritual in worship. We are creatures with bodies and souls, physical and spiritual, and as long as we have bodies, our worship will be embodied in some manner. Otherwise, the best worship would be transcendental meditation.

Finally, consider the effect of the modern bias against forms, on our doctrine of Scripture. If we use the Bible to pray or to sing praise, are we actually doing something less genuine in our devotion and piety? If we repeat the Lord's Prayer are we guilty of ritualism? And what does spontaneity do to the memorization of Scripture or the catechism? If we use the words of the Bible or the catechism to express our convictions, our desires, our praise and adoration, are we guilty of dead formalism and quenching the movement of the Spirit? (Conversely, might not the decline of psalm-singing and catechism memorization among Presbyterians indicate the triumph of experience in our churches and worship?)

So forms matter. There is no escaping them. Instead we need to determine what the correct forms are. They are the forms that please God, that permit us to express the truths He has revealed. And they are ones that edify us, that build us up in the faith and increase our knowledge and understanding of God's Word.

## What difference does it all make?

With a proper understanding of elements, circumstances and forms, let us return to the question of what makes Reformed worship unique. Look, for example at a typical Roman Catholic liturgy:

Introit  
Entrance of Clergy  
Salutation  
Epistle  
Gospel  
Sermon  
Nicene Creed  
Salutation  
Consecration of Elements  
Communion  
Thanksgiving  
Dismissal

At first glance, we might wonder what is so objectionable about the Roman Catholic mass. Aren't the right elements there? There is singing, prayer, and preaching. But are the circumstances proper, when Catholics worship in highly ornamental cathedrals with banners and images that violate the second commandment as the Reformed have understood it? And what about the forms? Presbyterians use forms different from Catholic forms. Presbyterians do not raise the bread to consecrate it. They sit at a table, where the Catholics come forward to an altar. A ten minute homily is a form that does not give significant attention to the Word of God. We can apply the same critique to contemporary worship styles. These services also seem to include all the proper elements of worship. But are the circumstances Biblical, when worship takes place on Wednesday night? And is the Word of God received with reverence when the message is communicated through the forms of multi-media?

These distinctions among elements, circumstances and forms lay at the heart of a proper understanding of worship. Reformed and Presbyterians cannot simply worry about theology and forget about the form theology takes in worship. Elements, circumstances and forms together produce distinctively Reformed worship, worship that is Reformed according to the Word of God. The result, Terry Johnson writes, is worship that is simple, spiritual, and substantial: "**simple** because the New Testament does not prescribe a complex ritual of service as is found in the Old Testament; **spiritual** because when Jesus removed the special status of Jerusalem as **the** place where God was to be worshiped (John 4:7-24), He signaled the abolition of all the material forms that constituted the typological Old Testament system including not only the city, but all that gave the city significance — the temple, the altars, the priests, the sacrificial animals, the incense; **substantial** because the God of the Bible is a great God and cannot be worshiped appropriately with forms that are light, flippant, or superficial; He must always be worshiped with 'reverence and awe'" (Hebrews 12:28).

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